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SUBJECT: UNESCO: AMBASSADOR GROSS MEETS ADG KHAN

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, Ambassador David A. Gross met with the UNESCO Assistant Director General for Communication and Information, Abdul Waheed Khan and Director of the Information Society Division of the Communication and Information Sector, Elizabeth Longworth on January 18, 2006 to discuss candidates for the post World Summit on the Information Society's (WSIS) Internet Governance Forum's secretariat, UNESCO's plans for implementation of WSIS Action lines (Khan discussed only 4 although UNESCO claims competence in 8.) and other issues including Khan's upcoming travel to the U.S., the success of UNESCO's MOUs on ICTs with U.S. companies and USAID and UNESCO programs designed to encourage capacity building in developing areas. END SUMMARY.

The Internet Governance Forum

12. (SBU) At Tunis, the UN Secretary General was asked to convene, by the second quarter of 2006, a meeting of a new forum for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue called the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Ambassador Gross inquired about UNESCO's views on post-WSIS activities. Khan stated that there were many actors jockeying for position, among them the UN's Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTP), which he reported was pushing hard to expand its mandate in this area. Khan believed that the proposed Global Alliance for ICT and Development might be created as a working group within the CSTP. (In conjunction with the Second Phase of WSIS, the UN ICT Task Force held a meeting in November 2005 on the concept of becoming a Global Alliance for ICT and Development.) Gross stated that he had heard that a proposal on the Global Alliance might have been sent to the UN's Deputy Secretary General, but was bounced back after WSIS.

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All agreed that the Global Alliance might be looking for a new mandate. Ambassador Gross emphasized that the U.S. was not playing a major role in deciding who should be the IGF's secretariat, although he noted that Canada proposed Markus Kumar. Would UNESCO, he asked, support this? Longworth stated that this would be a positive step because Geneva was more accessible to the developing world than other locations, such as New York. The U.N. in New York, Khan added, always wanted to do everything and its location might be a negative optic for the U.S.

13. (SBU) Ambassador Gross was asked who he thought would be on the IGF's bureau. He urged UNESCO to help make the forum a "big tent" by getting its own constituency involved, particularly actors from developing countries, NGOs and the private sector. He cautioned that UNESCO's own free flow of information agenda could otherwise get lost in the larger UN bureaucracy.

UNESCO POST WSIS

14. (SBU) Ambassador Gross emphasized that the US did not view WSIS as a mandate expander - rather the goal was for enhanced cooperation among WSIS actors within existing institutions and mandates. It was not an expansion of the ITU's - or anyone else's - mandate, he said. Khan began to describe which WSIS action lines fall under UNESCO's competency. UNESCO is the sole UN agency responsible for freedom of expression and the media under the WSIS plan of action, he said. He stated that UNESCO was trying to operationalize what this really means in practice and planned to organize a multi-stakeholder meeting on the topic for November 2006. The main issue, he stated, was building capacities. He noted UNESCO's numerous activities in post-conflict areas in terms of training media professionals, building community radio and television, and provided examples of progress in Afghanistan. He added that he had just received a 4 million dollar grant from the government of Italy to fund freedom of expression in the media.

15. (SBU) Ambassador Gross asked Khan whether UNESCO's

primary focus post-WSIS would be on the media side. Longworth indicated this was a case of triage. Khan cited 3 of the 8 Action lines mentioning UNESCO: Ethical dimensions of the information society; education and ICTs; and cultural and linguistic diversity. The ethical dimensions action line was to be split with ECOSOC, but Khan noted that it did not show signs of active involvement. Ambassador Gross emphasized that this particular action line gave the USG substantial pause. Longworth and Khan said the issue was so large it was hard to know which aspect to pick. Khan observed that in the past UNESCO has been "clobbered" on the issue of ethics for media professionals in particular, and acknowledged that the term could be a code word for censorship. Khan preferred the term "high professional standards" to which Gross quickly added the word "voluntary". Longworth noted that Khan had had to be very firm on this issue leading up to the 171st UNESCO Executive Board in September 2005, but that it continually re-emerges. For example, she noted that Venezuela would be asking the Director General about it during his annual question and answer session for UNESCO Permanent Representatives on January 19.

16. (SBU) Khan also specifically cited ICTs and Education as an Action line for UNESCO, but did not give specifics. When the conversation turned to cultural and linguistic diversity, Gross noted the effectiveness of the Internet as a tool for scattered communities, such as Native Americans, to reconnect with one another in their native tongue. Longworth stated that UNESCO had a major work stream on access to diverse languages in cyberspace. She emphasized that Communication and Information saw its value added in the technical aspect (putting languages into digital form) of promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, while UNESCO's cultural sector might have a role to play vis-a-vis cultural diversity. Ambassador Gross noted recent discussions between the USG and Google on translation software, among other issues. Putting such tools, if effective, together with the promotion of non-ASCII languages could yield a "quantum leap" for everyone, he stated. He offered USG assistance in contacting Google to explore these ideas further. Khan noted that Google was already involved with the World Digital Library, a project on which the U.S. Librarian of Congress has reached out to UNESCO. Longworth and Khan expressed an interest to work with Google at a high level on these issues along with developing better search engines, and devising new ways to share information, especially with regard to making the bumper crop of new digital libraries interoperable. UNESCO could be a platform to bring parties together on these questions, they offered.

OTHER ISSUES

17. (SBU) Khan told Ambassador Gross that he plans to visit the U.S. in April, 2006 and will focus on increasing awareness of UNESCO's role in WSIS implementation and its communication development programs. He also described the progress UNESCO has made on establishing MOUs with private US firms.

18. (SBU) Longworth noted that UNESCO was hosting a conference that explores how building Western style knowledge parks in developing countries can help boost capacity building on ICTs. Gross and Khan agreed that the quality of knowledge parks varied greatly. Khan described one outstanding example in Oman and added that others in his native India had taken off thanks to the work of the Secretary of Information Technology, Shri M. Madhavan Nambiar. Gross described a small but successful USAID program to promote capacity building in the Palestinian Authority city of Ramallah. Khan stated that UNESCO's branch office in Ramallah was doing a great deal of media and ICT training and offered to put USAID in touch with this office.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Khan appears supportive of locating the Internet Governance Forum in Geneva but seemed surprised by the idea that UNESCO should encourage its own constituency to partake in the IGF bureau. Khan and Longworth indicated that UNESCO is in triage mode with WSIS implementation - although it claims it has competency in 8 of the Action lines, it appears to only be focused on 4: media, ethical dimensions of the information society, cultural and linguistic diversity and open content, and education and ICTs. Khan and Longworth emphasized their work on media freedom with us since they know we are among its strongest supporters among UNESCO member states, but were more cautious on the questions of information ethics and linguistic diversity, where they emphasized a vaguer but more technical role. It remains to be seen whether the worker bees in the Communication and Information sector receive these messages loudly and clearly -- and heed them. END COMMENT.

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